

# FROM READERS **THEATER** TO MATH DANCES

Bright ideas to make differentiation happen.

By Nancy Zuckerbrod

**C**arol Ann Tomlinson is optimistic when she thinks about the future of differentiated instruction. “We started the conversation 12 or 14 years ago. Typically things don’t have this kind of shelf life,” she said during a recent interview.

Tomlinson, a professor at the University of Virginia Curry School of Education, has led the push for differentiated instruction and sees a strong commitment by educators to tailoring teaching to student academic levels, learning styles, and personal interests. However, Tomlinson says barriers still stand in the way to making sure every child gets what he or she needs.

One hurdle, says Tomlinson, is that teachers have to do something that’s both basic and difficult: forget how they were taught as children. Our teachers generally lectured to the class as a whole and expected us to recite back the facts. “We model what happened as we were kids. Everything keeps bringing you back to that thing you watched for 12 years,” Tomlinson says. “Most of us simply do not have images of what a classroom would even look like if three things were going on.”



Differentiation

Before attempting to tier a lesson to make it appropriately challenging for individual students, or alter an activity to meet the needs of certain learners, teachers should decide what they want their students to know and do at the end of the instruction. Then, they should come up with multiple ways of getting there, says Aleta Margolis, executive director of the Washington, D.C.–based Center for

Inspired Teaching, which provides professional development to educators. “Kids have an innate desire to learn,” she says. “The ‘how’ is what varies.”

Study Your Students

To figure out how children differ, and how you can best teach them, you have to survey and assess early and often, Margolis says. “Be a researcher. Collect

data points on your students,” she advises. “Pay attention. Take cues from them.”

Robert Voges, who teaches geography at Silver Sands Middle School in Port Orange, Florida, says he learns a lot from listening and watching, rather than talking and doing. “By observing and making anecdotal notes, you find out ‘this kid is always wanting to go to the bathroom when we do this.’” And then

you plan accordingly.

Assessing doesn’t have to be time consuming or elaborate. Tina Jacks, a language arts teacher at Turkey Run Junior-Senior High School in Marshall, Indiana, sometimes asks students a question about the day’s lesson. She then has them write the answer on a sticky note and tells them to put it on the door as they leave the classroom. She can quickly look at the notes and see which students understood a concept and which ones didn’t. She says she often alters her lesson plans as a result of the information she gets back.

Partner With Your Kids

Jacks acknowledges the pressure to differentiate can be daunting. “I have a class of 30 with five high-ability learners, three special-ed students, and (others) everywhere in between,” she says. Jacks tells students at the beginning of the year that things might look

a little different in her room. She even takes them out to the baseball field and instructs them to run around the bases as fast as they can while still finishing at exactly the same time. Eventually, a kid steps forward and tells her that the assignment is impossible, since everyone runs at different paces. The exercise leads to a class discussion about how students also learn at different paces.

“Kids understand differentiation almost every time before teachers do,” says Tomlinson. She says open communication with students and strong organizational skills are critical. Working with kids to build routines and procedures into the school day keeps things from becoming chaotic in a multitask classroom. For example, you have to go over things like where to hand in papers when teachers are working with individuals or small groups, and what kind of voice is appropriate when working with other kids.

Boost Your Skills

Another barrier to differentiated instruction is that teachers have a fairly shallow repertoire of instructional tools, Tomlinson says. She believes professional development must focus more on helping teachers get beyond basics such as lecturing and quizzing. Children can express what they’re learning in multiple ways, but they won’t be able to do that if teachers aren’t given the tools to lead them, Tomlinson adds.

Aleta Margolis tries to give teachers ideas for stepping away from textbooks and worksheets. A former teacher, she once asked sixth graders to choreograph a dance using parallel lines, perpendicular angles, right angles, obtuse angles, and other elements of geometry. She then added a written component to the assignment, telling the students to write out the instructions and see if other kids could recreate the dance.

						
Visual Learners		Auditory Learners		Kinesthetic and Tactile Learners		
HOW TO IDENTIFY	Visual learners like to keep an eye on the teacher and sit in the front of the class. Often, visual learners will find that information "clicks" when it is explained with the aid of a chart or picture.		Auditory learners are those who learn best through hearing things. They may struggle to understand a chapter they've read, but then experience a full understanding as they listen to the class lecture.		Kinesthetic learners are those who learn through experiencing/doing things. They may bore easily while listening to a class lecture. Kinesthetic learners like to experience the world and act out events.	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Use highlighting tape in text</li><li>2. Draw attention to posters and peripherals in room</li><li>3. Show filmstrips or videotapes</li><li>4. Use graphic organizers</li><li>5. Use pointers during whole-group instruction</li><li>6. Point out details in illustrations</li><li>7. Use expressive gestures and body language</li><li>8. Display word walls</li><li>9. Use PowerPoint presentations</li><li>10. Offer graphic novels, big books, puzzles, memory matching games</li><li>11. Encourage drawing</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Read aloud often</li><li>2. Make a listening center available</li><li>3. Put directions on tape</li><li>4. Record sections so students can listen and read along</li><li>5. Use music to teach skills</li><li>6. Vary the pitch and tone of your voice</li><li>7. Encourage peer discussions</li><li>8. Ask for retellings</li><li>9. Use Readers Theater</li><li>10. Offer books on tape and headphones (with wires cut off) to eliminate distractions</li><li>11. Teach story retelling with puppets</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Provide props for retelling</li><li>2. Supply clay and other simple building materials for making models</li><li>3. Slide skill sheets into page protectors and let students complete the exercises with a water-based pen whose ink can be erased when they're finished</li><li>4. Allow a "walk-and-talk" format for peer discussion</li><li>5. Incorporate energizing movement regularly</li><li>6. Have students use pointers during independent reading</li><li>7. Incorporate role-playing, acting out, and character roles</li></ul>	

PHOTOS (FROM LEFT): KTAALONG/STOCKPHOTO, FERNING/STOCKPHOTO, MZOROV/ANISTOCKPHOTO, SIBERAR SOURCE: THE SCHOLASTIC DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION PLAN BOOK BY CINDY MIDDENDORF

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# Differentiation

Administrators who want their teachers to get better at differentiated instruction should make sure any training teachers are getting is actually differentiated, too, says Jamie Snyder, who recently served as an interim school principal in Knoxville, Tennessee and is now participating in a fellowship program for principals there.

“By not making them sit through something they’ve already mastered, you’re modeling the importance of differentiation,” she says. Snyder adds that professional development should include observing other teachers who excel at differentiated instruction.

At E. L. Haynes Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., teach-

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ers observe one another and work as a team across grades. For example, two second-grade classes often come together, making the class larger but providing students with two teachers who can work in small groups or with individuals. Differentiation is abundant at the school. Carpets and small tables are carefully placed around early education classrooms to set up ample space for small-group time. Reading nooks are full of books as well as items such as magnetic letters with whiteboards, which could be helpful to tactile learners.

### Think Big, Start Small

E. L. Haynes principal Michelle Molitor says differentiation can seem overwhelming when kids are working at widely varying levels. She asks teachers to start small, for example, by focusing on differentiation in one subject at the start of a school year. “You’ve gotta break it down into bite-size pieces,” she says. It’s rare that teachers don’t eventually become devotees, she adds.

“Once people understand why they are doing something and can see the benefit, then they’re like, ‘Okay, I’m totally willing to do it,’” she says. One benefit that teachers usually discover is a better-managed classroom due to a higher level of student engagement. “There are going to be kids who are going to be disruptive if they already get it, because they’re bored.”

### Be Flexible When Grouping

Some educators fear that by emphasizing small-group learning, differentiation could lead to routine tracking of children by ability. However, that’s avoidable, says Felicia Dixon, professor emeritus at Ball State University, who consults with schools on differentiated instruction. She says teachers should be flexible in grouping students. Sometimes you should arrange groups by academic levels, and other times put kids together based on whether they are visual or kinesthetic learners or whether they are interested in sports or music, she advises. “That’s the beauty of the system,” she says. “You don’t just

assign students to the bluebirds and the wombats and the vultures, and they never move from that assigned group. Rather, you have three different groups that are always moving in response to learner needs.”

Jacks, the language arts teacher from Marshall, Indiana, says she relies on a technique that allows her to differentiate and alter the groups. She gives kids dice containing instructions for various activities or projects. Each die is different and can be directed at certain learning styles or readiness levels, but that’s generally not obvious to the kids, she says.

With younger children, center time is a great way to discretely differentiate the level of learning, says Jacks’s colleague, kindergarten teacher Alicia Mathis. When teaching sight words, Mathis says some students may use crayons or playdough to copy sight words, while others play games in which they have to find words within text.

Other groups may read sentences or stories that include the words, Mathis says. She is fortunate to have an aide in her classroom but suggests teachers who don’t have an aide might want to try asking parents to come in and help.

In certain subjects, particularly reading, Tomlinson notes it has become easier for kids to work on their own because of teaching tools available today. For example, there is now a huge selection of guided readers available. Similarly, technology has become helpful. Jacks uses laptops with her middle school students and directs them to a website where she posts assignments for them that vary by academic readiness level.

### High School Differentiation

Technology can be especially helpful in middle and high schools, where teachers sometimes need extra help differentiating because it’s harder to get to know students.

“My teachers see a different group of kids every 43 minutes,” says Robert Abbott, principal of Fort Atkinson Middle School in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. The school devoted more than two years to focusing intensely on differentiated instruction. Abbott says if you walk into an eighth-grade math class there these days, you would see a teacher doing some brief whole-group instruction, and you’d also see kids working at different levels on those concepts. Formative assessments would likely be under way, and students would be following whatever organizational system the teacher and students put in place to keep track of what they’ve mastered and what they haven’t.

Abbott says his teachers are constantly working to get better at differentiation, but that it has become the norm at Fort Atkinson. “It’s just laden in everything we do,” he says. “It’s just what good instruction looks like.” □

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